

An important step by the Legislature on mental-health reform

The Legislature is passing necessary reforms of the state mental health system, but now it needs to ensure they are funded.

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

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WASHINGTON state's slow climb back toward a functional mental-health system took a long, welcome stride Wednesday as the state Senate passed a slate of important reform bills.

If all become law, people with serious mental illnesses could see wider access to urgently needed care, and their families could have more power to get them that help. And the state could begin to slow the appalling trend of jails becoming de facto psychiatric institutions.

The most important word is *could*. The Senate's package of four bills — two of which already passed the less fiscally conservative state House — are IOUs for state budget-writers. Funding these necessary and overdue reforms is estimated to cost at least \$40 million in the 2015-17 budget — no small task for a Legislature under a court mandate by the state Supreme Court to increase education funding.

A centerpiece of the Senate package is known as Joel's Law, named in honor of a 28-year-old software engineer who, in the midst of psychosis, was killed by Seattle police in 2013. Thanks to tireless advocacy by his parents, [Doug and Nancy Reuter](#), the law would create for the first time an appeal process for families to intervene if their loved one is denied crisis hospitalization. A similar proposal passed the House last year, but

was quashed in the Senate. This version, sponsored by state Sen. Steve O'Ban, R-University Place, passed 46-3, and was previously unanimously approved by the House.

The most telling argument for Joel's Law is embedded in a state financial analysis, which estimates that perhaps 500 more people a year would be hospitalized simply because their families could appeal. Otherwise, those people would likely not get help they desperately need.

The Senate also addressed the inhumanely long waiting lists for treatment faced by people sitting in jails. Currently, some mentally ill defendants charged with low-level crimes sit in jail, waiting for treatment for months because of a backlog at Western State Hospital. That practice will go to trial later this month in federal court, where the state is widely expected to lose.

The state's system has already been battered by state Supreme Court justices for tragic and untimely deaths, and near-bottom-of-the-nation rankings for access to care.

But the real impetus for reform are stories such as one told on the House floor last month [by GOP Rep. Tom Dent](#), a beef and bison rancher from Moses Lake. Speaking in favor of Joel's Law, Dent told a spellbound legislative chamber of his son's struggle with bipolar disorder, including an arrest at gunpoint late last year.

"We are still struggling to find him psychiatric help," said Dent, his voice wavering. "It is only by the grace of God these people didn't shoot my son."

The Legislature has taken a step forward to shore up its duty to people with mental illnesses. But until these reforms are funded, it is only a half-step.

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